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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 003597

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STATE FOR SCA/FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A, S/CRS, SA/PB, S/CT,
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SUBJECT: GOA VIEWS ON THE PROPOSED DEPT OF VICE AND VIRTUE

REF: STATE 132443

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RONALD NEUMANN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Minister for Religious Affairs and the Hajj, in whose ministry the proposed Department for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue would be located, is a strong supporter for the reinstatement of the Department. Minister Shirani met with Ambassador Neumann on August 8 to discuss the new department and other changes in the ministry. The Ambassador impressed upon the Minister the extreme sensitivity aroused by this department in the West and even among many Afghans. He also noted that as soon as public pressure gets too strong it will be difficult to find a reasonable solution. Shirani stressed that the department will be recreated for the sole purpose of advocacy and specifically to help combat corruption. Per reftel, Embassy will continue to raise this issue with GOA in an effort to defeat or ameliorate it. END SUMMARY.

Religious Affairs Minister

12. (SBU) The Department currently exists under the Supreme Court but it is unclear what, if any, role it currently plays. The Department does have a budget, employees, and structure though efforts to find out more have so far come up empty. The minister said the purpose of its reinstatement or movement will be to combat corruption.

13. (SBU) The Ambassador argued that regardless of the good intentions involved with the re-creation of the department, it will be hard to keep control over such an office. People in the office may have extreme

views and may try to extend their mandate. This extension will be hard to stop once started. The problem in the West is there will be a strong reaction. Once public pressure begins from the West it will produce harsh reactions in Afghanistan. Under these circumstances, it will be more difficult to resolve these concerns diplomatically and for responsible people to make the right decisions.

14. (SBU) Shirani said that Afghanistan is a very traditional and religious country and the GoA is trying to use this department to speak to the country through the Ulema Council. He added that as Afghanistan is an Islamic country it should be led by Islam and not politics. As a result the Ulemas need government support and encouragement in order to help guide the people.

15. (SBU) Lastly Minister Shirani asked for support from the US to assist in publishing religious materials and for other assistance to the ministry. The Ambassador explained the restrictions on US aid to religious groups and said he would look into the matter.

Palace Views

16. (C) DCM and PolCouns discussed the Vice and Virtue issue on August 10 with President Karzai's Special Secretary Shaida Mohammad Abdali and Independent Media

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Commission Chairman Professor Maroofi. Both officials

KABUL 00003597 002.3 OF 002

felt that concerns of the West were overblown and did not take into account the GOA's need to rebut Taliban propaganda which painted Karzai as "soft" on Islamic values and totally corrupted by the West. Both asserted that the department would enjoy widespread public support. Shaida and Maroofi expected that its creation would be strongly supported by the Wolesi Jirga (WJ) but that the WJ would oppose any attempt to give the department the kind of enforcement powers that it had during under the Taliban. They stressed that the office would have no/no enforcement powers and would be located in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Hajj, so its officials would be under direct control of the executive branch. These two liberal-minded officials were under no doubt that the Department would be created, but also said they did not see it as anything to be concerned about in the context of a democratic Muslim society.

COMMENT

17. (C) It seems that there is some room to negotiate with the GoA over the department's creation especially with regards to its mandate. However, despite domestic opposition, especially from women's groups and women MP's, it is almost certain that the department will be created in some form especially after the Meshrano Jirga voted in support of it. Our most realistic strategy is two fold; first, delay this as long as possible in hopes of defeating or ameliorating this measure. Second, we want to press for specific definition of what the new office will do and define out of its purview all enforcement functions (most of which already exist as criminal or civil statutes with appropriate ministries). As the name of the committee comes from the injunction in the Koran to promote virtue and resist vice we are not optimistic that many Afghans would stand up in public to support a name change. Post will quietly continue

to put pressure on the GoA to address the concerns of the international and human rights communities. Overt opposition to the creation of this department will almost certainly leak resulting in a more polarized environment within which the USG and like-minded internationals and Afghans would be less effective in carrying forward efforts to reconcile Islamic law with the universal declaration of human rights and other modern legal instruments to which Afghanistan has also committed itself in its constitution.

NEUMANN